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Rebuilding a Bridge Burned

There is no universal definition of what it means to be a woman; no two women are the same. To be a woman in a society as patriarchal as this one means to be in constant battle with a system whose primary goal is to confine us into a box of inferiority in which we refuse to fit. Yes, we are women, but it does not stop there. We are women with our own sets of beliefs, ideals, lifestyles, and hardships. The book, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, is a compilation of the testimonies made by women from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, and through these testimonies they express their grievances concerning the women's movement and those within it. Through essays, personal letters, and poetry, these women view and critique feminism through the lens of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Divided into six sections, the book explores six different areas of concern for women of color in the women's movement: 1) how being women of color influences their visibility or invisibility in society; 2) the ways in which their backgrounds influenced their feminist political views; 3) the effects of racism in the women's movement; 4) cultural, class, and sexuality differences that cause a divide between women of color; 5) the importance of the cultivation of women of color, using writing as a tool; 6) their vision for women of color in the women's movement in the future.

From the time they were children, these women had to learn how to survive and navigate their way through a society that they would soon find out was not tailored for them. Section one

introduces the issue of color, and being able to “pass” in society, or not being able to. With skin color, for some, comes many privileges and advantages; however, for others, it brings with it many disadvantages and much adversity. In her poem, “When I was Growing up,” Nellie Wong states, “When I was growing up, my sisters/ with fair skin got praised/ for their beauty, and in the dark/ I fell further, crushed between high walls” (5). Because our society pushes Eurocentric standards of beauty, fair-skinned women of color are praised and deemed more desirable and pushed to the forefront, while darker-skinned women of color fade to the back, becoming invisible. There are a number of parents who breathe a sigh of relief when they have children who are not dark in skin complexion because they believe that their children will have better opportunities, “From those families we were one hand encouraged to leave, to climb up white...” (4). This does not come from a place of malice or hatred, but an awareness and knowledge of reality. It is no secret that fair-skinned people are, in fact, offered more opportunities than those who have darker skin. Realizing this, paired with the struggles that they may have faced themselves, they know what their children are going to be faced with and want them to not have to experience those same struggles. That is what any parent would want for their child, and Chrystos further proves this in “He Saw,” a poem about her father, when she expresses, “He gave me all the whitest advantages/ square house, football school, white mother baking white bread in a white oven/ He wanted to spare me his pain” (16).

In section two, the authors reflected on how their personal experiences would ultimately form and shape their political identities. More often than not, you will hear the phrase “The Personal is Political” used widely amongst feminists. What this means is that personal issues and political issues are synonymous; behind every political issue and stance there is a personal foundation for it, and vice versa. The women who wrote this book alluded to their own personal

oppressions to shed light on the bigger, collective issues in society. They were told that they were taking things too personally and to think about the whole, all while being told that there was always someone who has it worse than them. Cherrie Moraga states, “The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger lies in failing to recognize the specificity of the oppression. The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base” (24).

Moraga is simply declaring that oppression, regardless of the degree, is still oppression, and that people should not diminish the struggles of one because another appears to have it worse. No one wants to go unnoticed in the fight for equality, so it is almost as if there is a competition to see who is the most oppressed, and that is counterproductive. “The real power, as you and I well know, is collective. I can’t afford to be afraid of you, nor you of me. If it takes head-on collisions, let’s do it: this polite timidity is killing us” (Moraga 29). This subconscious competition is causing women within the movement to fear each other, causing distrust and skepticism, and you cannot be afraid of the people you are supposed to be fighting side by side with.

Section three confronts the dehumanizing and marginalizing effects of racism within the women’s movement. By white feminists, feminists of color are often asked to put their race on the backburner for the sake of the movement as a whole, as if a woman of color being on the forefront depreciates the value and validity of the entire movement. In regards to ethnicity and womanhood, Mitsuye Yamada states that the two are not warring with one another, but women of color are often made to feel like they have to choose between the two (70). Women of color raise the concern that white women do not care to learn or know much of anything about them, which makes it easier for them to forsake and disregard them within the movement, a point that Judit Moschkovich mirrors when she says, “How can one feel guilt about screwing over

someone/some country she knows nothing about?” (74). Doris Davenport also cosigns with this when she asserts that white people “have little knowledge or respect for the cultures of third world people (that is, unless they intend to exploit it)” (83). These women feel as though they are seen as ornamental rather than functional, vital assets to the movement unless they blindly go along with what white women set out for them, or allow white women to piggyback off of their work like Audre Lorde felt Mary Daly did. Lorde confronts Daly in a letter in which she asks, “Did you ever really read my words, or did you merely finger through them for quotations which you thought might valuably support an already-conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connection between us?” (91). The authors feel as though that white supremacy amongst white women makes them feel that they are entitled to use women of color because they see them as inferior.

Culture, class, and sexuality differences are issues that cause a serious divide between women of color, and section four explains this. Lesbians in communities of color, especially the black community, are subjected to abysmal levels of homophobia. Cheryl Clarke asserts, “The black lesbian is coerced into the experience of institutional racism and must suffer as well the homophobic sexism of the black political community” (128). In the black community, homosexuality is viewed as an unnatural, “white” thing to be used as a tool to feminize and emasculate the black male, and ruin the black family. When asked how they felt about dealing with homophobia from other black women in an interview, Barbara and Beverly Smith stated that there was nothing more hurtful than being hated by your own (121). Barbara Smith stated, “Feminists have been portrayed as nothing but ‘lesbians’ to the black community” (123), and that was the reason that so many black women were resistant to identifying as feminists. The Smith sisters also raised the issue of the women’s movement being dominated by middle-class

women, and middle-class women being the ones who dictate what gets done and how. They felt as though poor women were overlooked in the movement, which they often are. Beverly Smith expresses that “if you are a recipient of class oppression, that means that you are poor, you are working-class and therefore day to day survival is almost the only thing you can focus on” (113). Women who are poor and struggling to make ends meet are usually too preoccupied with figuring out where their next meal is coming from and trying to put food on the table for their families, so it is imperative that their fellow women step forward for equality and liberation on their behalf.

Section five talks of the importance of cultivating women of color, specifically through writing. Cherrie Moraga states, “In our common struggle and in our writing we reclaim our tongues” (161), and what she means is that by them coming together and creating this book and sharing their stories, they finally found a way to let their voices be heard. Gloria Anzaldúa expresses, “I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories miswritten about me, about you” (167). She uses her writing as a shield to protect herself against those who wish to defame and discredit her, and the women of color she wishes to defend. Moraga and Anzaldúa wanted this book to serve as a revolutionary tool, hoping that women would read their words and put them to action in their own lives. Through this book, these women’s testimonies would live on and be preserved, free from erasure. “We want the book in libraries, bookstores, at conferences, and union meetings in every major city and hole-in-the-wall in this country” (Moraga and Anzaldúa xlvii).

Finally, section six illustrates the authors’ visions of the women’s movement for the future. Andrea Canaan says the women’s movement “is a battle for economic, political, and social freedom and not a battle of the sexes. It is not white. It is not racist. It is not classist. It is

not closed” (237). Pat Parker declares that we should not settle for just reforming the world, but committing to changing and revolutionizing it (242). Collectively, the women who wrote this book hope for a women’s movement that is free from exclusion and discrimination; they want feminism to finally live up to its name and seek to liberate *all* oppressed women, and not just the ones in higher places. These women want to leave room for criticism and questioning, but still be able to possess the ability to work through issues together as a group. A whole is only as strong as the sum of its parts, and if the women who make up the women’s movement are constantly clashing with one another, the entire movement is doomed to fall apart.

Ultimately, *This Bridge Called My Back* was a literary masterpiece. We as women are not one-dimensional, and the women in this book proved that fact. Intersectionality is extremely important in the women’s movement because much too often are women asked to hide, or silence parts of themselves for the sake of all women as a whole. My understanding of feminism is equality, liberation, and love. If feminism is promoting love and sisterhood amongst women, love from my sisters should not come at the price of my silence; silence is violence. Feminism is about all women, but all women do not share the same struggles. A white feminist will not experience the struggles of a black woman; an upper middle class woman will not share the struggles of a woman of the working, or lower class; a straight woman will not endure the struggles of a lesbian woman. For us to truly progress as a whole, we have to be knowledgeable of the parts of that whole. Telling a woman of color that you see her as a woman and not as a color does not help her. She and others see her color, and if you cannot do the same, then you do not truly see *her*. I feel as though the purpose of this book for the women who wrote it was to make themselves visible to the people who refused to see them. It was their way of acknowledging themselves and forcing others to acknowledge them as well. They were fed up

with merely asking people, mainly their white counterparts, to see them and began to demand it. Not only did the book address the issues between women of color and white women, it also made a point to address issues amongst women of color themselves as well. The one major criticism I have about the book is that there was no mention of transgender women. Transgender women, especially those of color, are experiencing a grotesque level of erasure because they are not biologically female, so people don't consider them "real" women. Just like women who were born female, transgender women are poor, abused, discriminated against, and harmed. They are our sisters, and this fight is just as much theirs as it is ours.

Works Cited

Moraga, Cherrie, and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. 4th ed. New York: Suny Press. 2015. Print